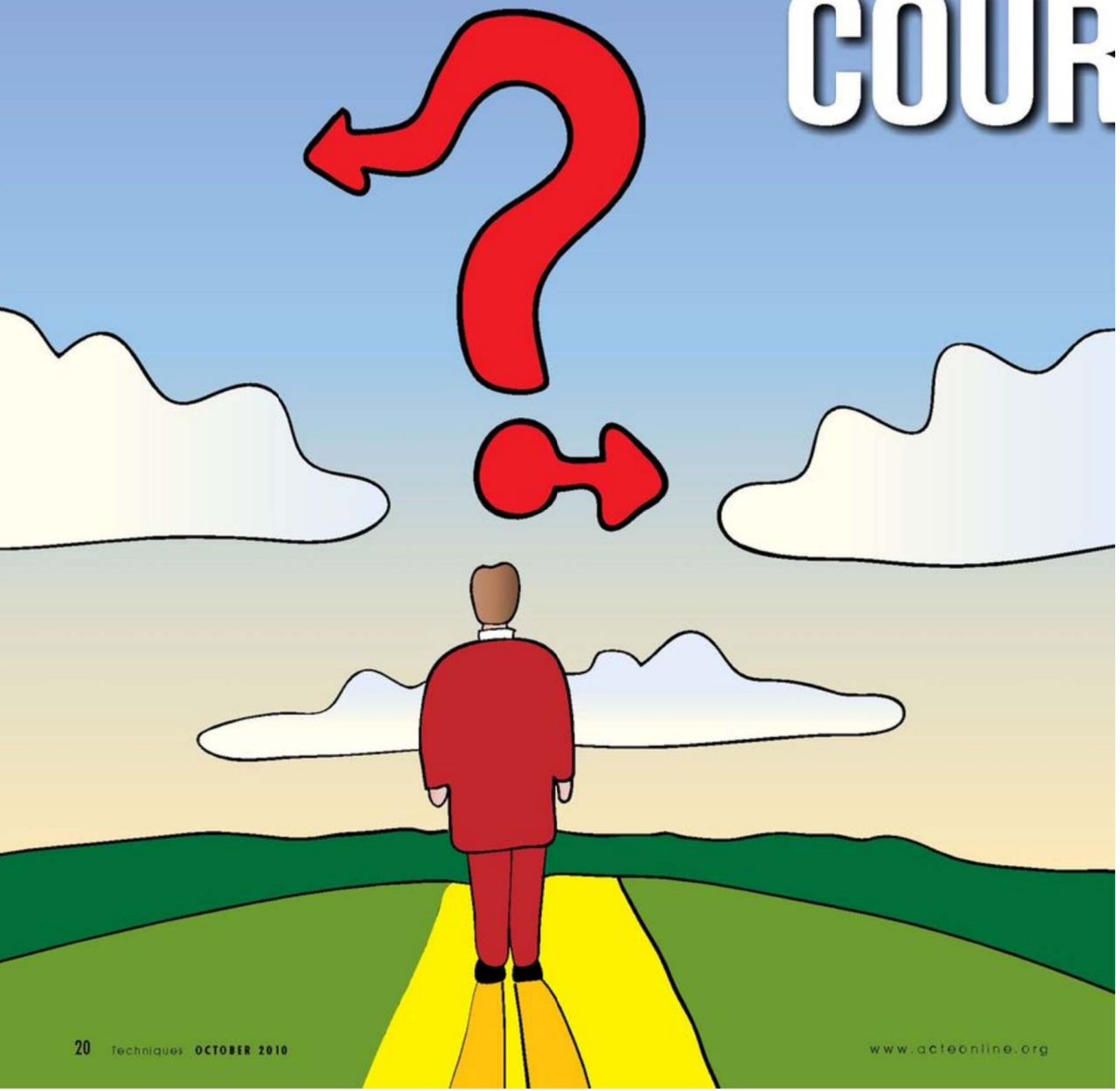


CHOOSING HIGH COUR



SCHOOL COURSES WITH

Purpose

BY STEVE AYOTTE AND SHARON SEVIER

Each year after completing the work on our high school course description guide, we are excited about the wide variety of courses students have to choose from. Student choice is important to us as a district, and offering coursework that expands students' postsecondary options is of primary concern. However, each year we are disappointed by classes that don't make it. We have also been concerned about the number of students who go off to college with great plans to major in a certain area, only to figure out that they either don't really like their major or, more often, didn't take coursework in high school that could have provided a foundation for what they are studying. In both of these cases, there is an easy fix: students should choose courses in high school that match their career interests

and goals, and learn foundational skills that are specific to a career pathway. It sounds so simple; why, then, are students not doing this?

Having a Plan is Essential for Success

In choosing high school courses, students often seem to focus on everything except preparation for an intended major or career. They consider graduation requirements, weighted classes, easy classes...but rarely are these types of choices preparing students for postsecondary education. I happened to visit a counseling office when a counselor was assisting a student in choosing a course to fill a hole in her schedule. The counselor listed the courses that had openings during the time slot needed. The student's first concern was to identify which course was easiest, and

then which courses sounded boring. Not once during the selection process did the student consider which one of the courses might follow the career pathway she had in mind. It was a simple case of checking off the requirement with the easiest and least boring class available. That's like shooting a dart at a target blindfolded, and that type of decision making is what can lead college freshmen to that awful realization of: "Oh my gosh...I hate this major...what do I do now?"

Career Companion Guide to the Rescue

In an effort to give our students the tools they need to choose courses that meet their talents, interests and career aspirations, our school district (Rockwood School District, Eureka, Missouri) developed a guide to help students choose



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROCKWOOD SCHOOL DISTRICT

A counselor uses *The Career Companion Guide* to assist a student in making more personally relevant course choices.

their courses with a plan in mind. Our *Career Companion Guide* was developed as a resource that offers students information that relates to high school course offerings, gives sample five-year plans for career paths, and even suggests extracurricular activities that enhance a student's area of interest/talent. It has been met with rave

reviews from school counselors, teachers, parents and, yes, even students.

The companion document is one resource to guide students toward making more informed course selections based on students' interests and future career goals. The companion document uses career clusters as a model for planning. Using ca-

reer clusters does not lock or track students into one career area. It is instead a more comprehensive way to explore an area of stated interest. Included in the companion document is a chart that explains the connection between career paths, career clusters and career pathways. This connection has been building in elementary school, but it is Rockwood's intent to have students see the connection between these paths, clusters and pathways and the choices they make in high school. Students may discover which career cluster seems to fit them best by taking the Missouri Connections Interest, Skills and Values Inventories, or one of many other reputable interest inventories on the market today.

The companion guide goes on to explain each career cluster in more detail, along with a description of each pathway within the cluster area. Once a student goes to the cluster area of interest, they



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explore careers within each pathway. The careers within that pathway are listed according to education level, and are linked to Kuder Occupational Overview pages. The Kuder Web site gives students an understanding of the career field itself, points of interest, resources on the career, education necessary, income levels and projections, characteristics of the profession, and much more. Most folks who visit these sites ask why this was not around when they were in school!

After the career investigation, the companion document offers job information and research resources, career cluster resources (including Missouri Connections, which is a wonderful resource in our state), and cluster professional organizations and educational resources. If a student is interested in a cluster area, all the information they could ever need is right at their fingertips.

Rockwood's *Career Companion Guide* makes students aware of their high school options by listing all district courses related to the various cluster areas. This list contains not only career and technical education (CTE) courses, but any course that would be of benefit to their goals and interests. Also listed are the local CTE center offerings in the cluster as well as online course offerings in the state. This information is followed by sample templates of personal plans of study based upon specific career clusters, so students can refer to them as they work on their own personal plans of study. This serves as a great guide for a student to plan out high school and beyond.

Forecasting Jobs and Careers

The last portion of the companion document includes future jobs and careers within the St. Louis and Missouri regions, and current pay rates/salaries for many careers. We include data and projections from MERIC (Missouri Economic Research and Information Center), both short and long-term, so that students are able to make educated decisions about

future careers should they remain in the area. Data is also included from the Missouri Career Center, Missouri Connections, and the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Marketing the Guide to Stakeholders

In rolling this document out, we did a major publicity campaign aimed at several of the key stakeholder groups. In the month before online registration, the document was introduced and explained to the school counselors at the middle and high school levels. Each middle and high school received a large number of printed copies for the counselors to use with students. In the future, we will guide users to the electronic version of the document; the links are readily available for exploration and referencing. The printed copies were made available to "whet the appetites" of the various audiences and they were snatched up very quickly.

Teachers at the high school were a second group of stakeholders who received instruction on how to use the *Career Companion Guide*. Of particular interest, we targeted the teachers of our Freshman Seminar course. Freshman Seminar is a first semester course for freshmen geared toward making their transition to high school a successful venture. During the course, students receive instruction about personal/social issues that pertain to high school, academic skill development and career exploration. The guide is the perfect resource for exploring careers and matching interests and coursework to aspirations.

Each December and January, the director of guidance and counseling travels to all of the district's middle schools to do a presentation on high school planning. This same presentation is done in the evening for parents, and has been very well received. This year, our coordinator of practical arts demonstrated the guide during the parent presentation. The parent response was overwhelming; a num-

ber of parents said that they were going home to use the guide themselves! Another planned activity is to have the guide presented during Parent Coffee meetings across the district middle schools.

Looking Ahead

The *Career Companion Guide* is on our Web site, www.rockwood.k12.mo.us, and is available for use. The easy online access makes it a practical and highly useful tool for students and parents as they discuss course selection, graduation requirements and future plans. We expect that as this document becomes more deeply entrenched in the course selection process, our students will leave high school with a more well-informed and trained background that leads them to a better defined postsecondary goal. **I**

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